

G. S. Batishchev, "Contradiction and antagonism"

Voprosy dialektiko-materialisticheskoi teorii protivorechiia, Problemy dialektiki, vyp. #3, Leningrad: Izdo-vo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1973, pp. 94 - 102.

Translator's Note: *This article, written as a polemic against Maoist interpretations of dialectics, develops a complex critique of the concept of antagonistic contradiction, although without mentioning that term. It also gives some explanation of other familiar themes from Batishchev, including his concept of "irrationally distorted form" of a concept, and his critique of "polarist" interpretations of dialectical contradiction, and his rejection of "substantialism." The ellipses "..." are part of the published text. All notes are by the author. This translation is a first draft--all suggestions welcome.*

It is well known that in dialectical logic, each universal principle, each universal category does not dwell in strict isolation from the world of particular and unique phenomena, but, on the contrary, is submerged in that world. These principles and categories will never be independent; it is just in this immersion that they find the source of their enrichment--concretization and development. Indeed whatever is rich in content is a category growing in its generality, in which new, particular content is always found, issuing in a creative process which still grapples with this category. Contrary to Hegelian logical preformism, however, it is false that everything is pre-established beforehand and entirely foreseen with absolute universality. Precisely in their work, general categories are directed toward the concrete and draw life-giving energy.

Dialectical logic would not be truly dialectical, however, if it did not also admit "paradoxical" relations between general categories and historically transitory phenomena. In particular, the latter simultaneously include within themselves also particular realizations of the universal. Besides, of course, a principle suffers destruction in its thought structures, is warped and appears as a [95] result of something completely counter to itself, something fully renouncing its authentic essential appearance and not even negating or contradicting it, but unrelated to it. This is already not simply "its other," not simply a modification to the form of manifestation, but something which claims independent and insular present being, on a level at which it never-the-less is the "very essence itself." For the investigation of a similar class of paradoxical phenomena in Marxist philosophy, the concept of *irrationally distorted [prevrashchennoi] forms* is available, a concept first introduced and tested on the subject matter of political economy by K. Marx. This concept helps especially to comprehend critically those particular facts whose uncritical descriptions are able to make the concepts expressing them or representations by the carriers of their meanings reverse or distort the actual meanings, displacing their essential connections and the genesis of these facts. For that reason, the concept of distorted form serves as a means of the critical overcoming of wrong subjective representations which develop into grounds of objectively manifested forms. According to Marx, these include wages, rate of interest, rent of land ..., which give rise to objectified phenomena of terminological fetishism, etc.

In the present essay an attempt is made to analyze the phenomenon of antagonism with the help of the concept of distorted forms, considering that phenomenon in the light of the problematic of dialectical logic and in the particularity of its conception of contradiction. Getting positive results will provide the possibility, to continue¹ at the same time the critique deserved by the proposed Maoist ideological "dialectics," in the most exact form--its warlike, nihilistic conception of the struggles of opposites or extremes.

Antagonism, as is known, represents a specific phenomenon, characterizing and differentiating those social formations in which there is inherent resistance and conflict of opposite social-class forces, social groups, institutions, ideologies, etc. The existence of antagonisms could not fail to impose

¹ In its critical aspect the present essay is joined to the essays: Lekorskii, V. A., Batishchev, G. S., Kuraev, V. I., "Real and imaginary dialectics. Critical notes on the Maoist understanding and the application of dialectics," VF, 1971, no. 8; see also in the book: *Opasnyi kurs*, vyp. 2, M, 1971.

essential impressions on all aspects of social-human, cultural development in the tendencies of many centuries, and, finally receives different--both apologetic and critical--expression in class consciousness, in religious representations, and in systematic constructions of worldviews. [96] At the same time as differences and fierce hostilities about this or that were ideally reproduced and defended in conservative and reactionary views of world antagonisms, the most progressive worldviews (beginning with critical-utopian views) are always inspired by the aim of breaking with antagonism in human existence. It is another matter that in the search for means and practical realizations of ways for the resolution of this social task, the foremost thinkers often become prisoners of that same "logic" of world antagonism against which they ardently struggle.

Marxism is connected particularly with critical-progressive traditions, preeminently bequeathing the historical task of overcoming world antagonisms, along with their ideological symptoms--a cult of force, nihilistic destruction, preaching eternal animosity, unending and all-devouring wars of polar extremes. Only from the standpoint of this task is it possible to truly conceive the place and significance of the concept of "antagonism," as it exists in Marxism. Consequently, the general spiritual climate, inherited and developed by Marxism, its methodological principles, its worldview, and a logic rich in content--dialectics--have nothing in common either in its origin, its essence, or its general direction, with a nihilistic ideological universal hostility or general antagonism. The Marxist concept of "antagonism" is limited to a definite, concrete historical framework of applicability, but the main thing--and this main thing is not reduced to classification procedures and taxonomic organization--is especially critical and anti-nihilist in its inner content. To clarify the preceding it helps to analyze antagonism as a distorted form, an analysis which, however, presupposes a positive investigation of that which particularly undergoes transformation and appears as antagonism--that is, dialectical contradiction.

The idea of contradiction as a deep, essential "dimension" of reality, as a category which arose in dialectics not by any subjective or ideological "generalization" of violent conflicts and enmity, nor by means of extrapolation to the whole world of someone's hostile mythological representations. It is true that in Heraclitus, the father of the idea of contradiction, it is possible to find the fragment: "War is father of all, monarch of all" (B53). But this is only an allegory, the meaning of which is deciphered adequately only in the context of the whole conception of Ephesian philosophy. This conception is summarized in the image of "harmony of the lyre and the bow," symbolizing monism, but not any sort of dualism of hostile, antagonistic origin.

The generalized ideology of universal militarism is dualistic. That is, it preaches the eternal opposition of two world sources, two absolutes, conducting an endless war between them: divine and demonic, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, universal plus and universal minus. In its very essence, this is a *religious-mythological* representation, which only in primitive (ancient) variants of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism was able to play historically a relatively progressive role. Subsequently, the ideology of two sources inherently lost this progressive role. Conversely, the dialectical idea of contradiction, from the time of its origin and to the present, distinctly resists all mythologizing and all preaching of world-wide absolutes (whatever guise is adopted by the latter--personified forces or irrational archetypes, etc). This idea is the product of the pathos of sovereign-rational comprehension, not applying any absolutes in its creative direction which would stand above man and world, above culture and nature. An ideology of unending *fatalistic* militarism is this: everything is utterly fated, according to them, to be plunged in an infinite, world-wide war of absolutes, which splits each object into hostile extremes and inherently makes them only means in a war, in this senseless, all-absorbing current of mutual destruction. Nothing of genuine concreteness and genuine value is preserved in the world, unrelated to the service of negative, everything is subjugated to destructive goals, and everything is utilized.

Conversely, the dialectical idea of contradiction, being oriented toward the penetration into logic of universal movement and development, is the logic of the cultural-historical process as an open process, by no means as a self-contained substantialist principle, and opens the world to man as free from all fatalism, from all pre-ordination and pre-establishment of new possibilities and results--as a world infused with a problematical character, as a field for true creativity.

The ideology of universal enmity is conservative and static; it depicts the world in an unsurmounted condition of "eternal return," eternal repetition of one and the same drama, since world-wide absolutes lead the struggle, in principle lacking any positive outcome. Particularly because they only oppose one another and are only hostile and destructive to one another, there cannot be anything in common between them, any resolution of conflict, and any synthesis of conflicting antitheses, which means there cannot be any new growth. Each temporary victory of one extreme attracts to itself the recreation of a split inside itself--a split into *the very same* polar extremes again. A universal minus follows each embodiment of universal plus always as a shadow; it is omnipresent and ineradicable; it is always a series, wherever it rushes--its machinations, the influence of its conductors are everywhere, as automatically germinating and reproducing in the very womb of the opposite plus. Then the world is also tormented by eternal fierce enmity, eternal war... "it is sufficiently evident, that this ancient mythology, a world pictured only in the gloomy [98] colors of a perpetual Saint Bartholomew's massacre..., can serve only as a means kindling insanity." ²

The idea of dialectical contradiction, on the other hand, is oriented to the comprehension of mutually penetrating opposites, to the resolution of acute antinomies in a creative process, in innovation, in creation. Dialectics is not the logic of nihilistic destruction, but the logic of creation, the logic of *synthesis*. Only from this point of view is it possible to truly conceive the expression "the unity and *struggle* of opposites": its meaning is not concerned with any subjective striving to spread to the whole world its own frame of mind of fierce hostility, and so to say, to ontologise its quarrelsome character. Its true meaning is included in the fact that each resolution of an antinomy is inseparable from its reproduction anew, and that the supposition of thesis and antithesis takes place in the form of relatively independent opposites, each of which is within itself completely antinomian, and the relationship of which only complicates the initial contradiction, and that, lastly, the resolution of an antinomy is impossible except by means of *synthesis*, i.e., enrichment and creation. It is highly essential that this general worldview, the dialectical-logical content of the concept of "struggle" (expressed allegorically) also gives the truest general criterion for the evaluation of social struggles--a criterion which is not taken in a figurative sense, but in a literal one: prior to being a struggle *against* something and someone, to the extent to which that is justified in this focus from the communist point of view, that struggle should be defined in its essential content, and especially defined positively as the struggle *for* synthesis, *for* creation, *for* polyphonic monism in the development of the cultural-historical process. It goes without saying that under this it is not possible for any barbarous motive and savage psychosis to be introduced into logic ...

However, in those stages of human history which did not get the qualification of antagonistic formations by accident, the most refined civilized modifications prosper fully, while well armed barbarism rages, inspired and manipulated by contemporary means of mass psychosis (racism, fascism, etc.). Here we come into collusion not with some foreign essence of these formations, capitalism in particular, but with lawful results of the immanent contradictions of this type sociality and the characteristic properties of the realization of these contradictions through alienation, objectification, and de-personalization of human agency. Marxist dialectics cannot remain unimpaired by the existence of these plagues. Dialectics has the means for the comprehension of and struggle with them in the concept of antagonism.

First of all, opposites--including [99] forms of antagonism--always have something essential in common between them, otherwise it would not be possible for them to struggle; they always attract one another, otherwise they would not be able to contradict one another inside one whole; they carry in themselves each contradiction of this whole and in this sense "interpenetrate" one another...

But the "cunning" of antagonism also consists just in this, that its immediate available being--antagonism as a phenomenon in itself--not only does not reveal this secret dialectics behind them, but also puts in its place a reverse picture: endowed with relative self-sufficiency, opposites within a whole *appear as if* they were *primordially* self-sufficient polar extremes, not having anything in common, not originating from any one process of genesis, which simply come into conflict *externally*.

² *Opasnyi kurs*, vyp. 2, M., 1971, s. 104.

On the surface of phenomena everything appears as the external relation of opposites not derived and dependent on the immanent contradictions which define them, but, on the contrary, all contradictions are derived from externally opposing opposites in the form of polar extremes and are only something introduced by these opposites in a non-contradictory whole. The negative character of this objective appearance, this objectively existing distorted form consists in what by reason of its real problems of real social development and social-class struggles can appear not as having a positive objective source and, consequently, having resolutions only together with positive resolutions of objective contradictions, but as something non-objective, an alien object, artificially imposed on it only from the outside--only by the imposition of antagonistic forces--i. e., "resolution" only by means of negative measures of counteraction or destruction. Positive problems with rich content disappear, as it were, with only one remaining negative artificial barrier, only one pseudo-problem allegedly requiring negative actions in order to remove, throw off, or eradicate the force giving rise to them. In place of dialectical problems come them superficially negative form so that they appear nothing less than tasks of a military type. And then even the very content and positive criteria of struggle *for* the resolution of problematic contradictions and, as a necessary result--*against* forces disturbing and opposing them which *seem* to be secondary effects and means with respect to the *negative* aspects of this struggle. In short the negative absorbs and suppresses the positive. Such is this distorted form, such is this phenomenon, taken in isolation and uncritically.

It is always necessary to approach antagonism from the point of view of the logic of dialectical contradiction. If antagonism is admitted as superficially available being beyond something independently absolute, then it is impossible to truly conceive either antagonism itself or contradiction. In order not [100] to remain at the level of the distorted form, the investigation must on no account begin with it, but with its originating processes which are concealed from it, unrepresented in it and blotted out.

The objective changeability of form, which presents itself as antagonism in relation to dialectical contradictions, includes within it the possibility of false representations and conceptions. To this possibility employs the ideology which wittingly absolutizes antagonism and explains contradiction itself in the image of distorted forms. Such is the ideology of the Maoists.

In the Maoist interpretation the tendency is realized which arises and is based on the ground of erecting antagonism into a logical, worldview principle. This means that oppositions are considered just from the point of view of their allegedly primordial external contradiction³--as a dualism of two essences or world sources. The consistent carrying out such logic is committed not to allow any positive definition behind each of these sources, behind each of these polar extremes, in which these metaphysical sources are objectified under its "earthly" realization; here the positive definition would change its assumption of a certain concreteness within itself, unrelated to the inclusion in the confrontation of metaphysical absolutes, in their eternal war. Hence the pole itself is entirely characterized by the fact that it is directed *against* the other, against the counter-pole and exhausted by this characterization. The result is that the essence of the pole consists in its being as *anti-counter-pole*. Correspondingly also every property which is possessed by the pole is not taken as having the right to truly concrete and positive significance, and only as the *carrier* of official negative functions, as a medium, oriented to abstract negation of the other pole, to its destruction. Everything is only anti-counter-medium and nothing more... Such is the logic of antagonistic nihilism.

According to this logic, every creation has a meaning only as dependent on a general negative task--destruction--and finds in the latter its criteria of resolution. Thus takes place the distinctive reduction of all positive conceptions to negative ones: creation--to destruction; finding--to deprivation;

³ For example, in the essay "The theory of combining two in to one," especially dedicated to the negation of the dialectical idea of the unity of opposites and its vilification, dualism of extremes is presented as a counterweight to all those who "flog an absurdity, alleging that the unity of opposites means commonality." ("Hongqi" 2 March 1971. The essay was signed "authors of the group of revolutionary mass critics.")

perception--to refutation; value--to devaluation; solidarity--to cleavage, etc. Hence--tendencies to unlimited negation and *self-negation*, to renunciation of its particular content.

[101] As much as the negative function imposed on each concrete object--that is, to be the means of destruction, exposure, devaluation, and cleavage--can never be exhausted, to that extent must it at this or that stage, evidently or not, enter into contradiction with this function, and into this forceful transformation of it into a carrier of hostile forces, into something employed by the opposite pole. According to the logic of antagonistic nihilism, such an object is subject to unmasking and destruction. If such a sad fate is undergone by one object, the turn of another to discover its opposite and, consequently, hostility will also come. The peculiar mechanism of this works in such a way that some the contradictoriness and some problematical character constantly is brought out, to be discerned in it a symptom of hostile action or something irreconcilably alien, and object, including within itself contradictions and problems, being transferred from the categories of their properties into categories of phenomena which must be renounced and which should be destroyed. Once tuned to the logic of antagonistic nihilism, the mechanism must gradually destroy its own particular properties and, in the final result, fully destroy itself. But all this is so, certainly, only among abstractions, in which real tendencies are seen in the latter features and reveal themselves completely. In concrete activity the tendencies of antagonistic nihilism and its "logic" do not exist in isolation, but interconnected with a multiplicity of other factors. And nevertheless we have observed also in life the Maoist application of this "logic:" the devastating tornado of the "Great Leap Forward" and the explosions of the "Cultural Revolution" stroll around China and leave behind themselves so many footprints.

Summary of results: Antagonism is not simply a particular, historically organized form of realization and manifestation of contradictions, but is also a distorted form--in the strict Marxist' sense. It is insufficient to produce a concept of antagonism in localized taxonomic frameworks and not release it from these frameworks; consistent dialectical analysis of "curbing" this phenomenon inside these organizing frameworks is still completely necessary as well. In each case, in each situation, the fact of antagonism, if it takes place there, should not only not be interpreted expansively,⁴ not be allowed to be extrapolated beyond its limits, but also in general should not be considered as an independent phenomenon. Revealing the distorted form in the fact of antagonism and depriving it of its alleged independence, we expose it to *reexamination* from the point of view of the dialectics of contradictions and set up the concept of antagonism [102] under *strict methodological control* of this dialectics. Only such control is able to reliably stave off an uncritical portrayal and construction of antagonisms, and closes the way to erecting them into world view principles. Such control confronts destructiveness and nihilism alien to Marxist dialectics.

Everything that was said above certainly does not mean that the role of the concept of antagonism can be disparaged or negated. On the contrary this role has been incontestable and remains great. Precisely with the help of this concept, connected within a system of other necessary concepts, Marxist science has revealed and continues to reveal specific properties in the relation between opposites proper to those social formations which are deservedly called antagonistic. Exactly this concept serves the theoretical interpretation of all the sharpness of class contradictions and irreconcilable conflicts, of all the heat of class struggle in the formations named, in particular under capitalism. This concept, however, in so far as it figures in its particular place of this sort, remains only a *subordinate means*. In no way is it possible to release it from the methodological control and from subjection to universal principles and the spirit of dialectics, in particular, the logic of removal and resolution of contradictions. And this is related both to the investigation and the evaluation of historical phenomena, as well as to the task of the struggle of ideas with the opponents of Marxism. The concept of antagonism as a distorted form allows it to be seen clearly that the inner content of the Marxist class

⁴ It should be kept in view that in the texts of the collected works of K. Marx and F. Engels the German terms "gegensätzlich" (literally "oppositional," containing opposites) is often translated inadequately as "antagonistic," which is not supported by a rigorous understanding of the subject.

approach to class phenomena and its criteria is not negative, but positive and historically constructive (but equally also to see, how far this approach is expressed in the Maoist interpretation).